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ON

INDEPENDENCE FOR EAST TIMOR

submitted by

the Canada Asia Working Group

Elaine Brière

INTRODUCTION

My name is Elaine Brière. I am here today as a spokesman for the Canada Asian Working Group, and as a photojournalist who has travled extensively throughout Asia. I lived with and photographed village people in East Timor 18 months prior to the Indonesian invasion of the country in December of 1975.

When I was in East Timor it was possible to travel freely throughout the countryside; to visit the Timorese in their homes and villages, at work in their gardens, and in the colourful Sunday markets that characterized Timorese social and economic life.

I found the Timorese to be a gentle and dignified people who had a natural correspondence with the their environment and a highly developed religious and cultural ethos. They were unique in that they had retained their ancestral lands in spite of the incursions of the colonial era; they had retained a high degree of pluralism and diversity in their languages, customs, and religious beliefs; and they had a highly viable village-based economy which provided ample food, shelter and security for all.

The people I photographed treated me with dignity, cheerfulness and respect. They were personal friends. Some I know are dead, if not all. The attempted destruction of their entire way of life outrages me on a very personal level. I have devoted all my energy to carrying the message of their struggle for independence and a return to a peaceful society.

The Canada Asia Working Group (CAWG), an interchurch coalition mandated by the churches to work on human rights and justice issues linking Canada and our partners in the Asian region, listens carefully to voices of people in Asia. Canadian churches have long and historic links with Asian partner churches, development agencies, interfaith networks, and human rights organizations in various Asian countries including East Timor. As Christians we are called to work on behalf of the victims of poverty, injustice and oppression. We

both seek to understand the causes of abuse of human dignity and to speak out against the gross and systematic violations of human rights found all too frequently in certain Asian countries with which we have close ties. Indonesia's treatment of the Timorese people is one of the most extreme examples of what we are trying to expose as intolerable and inhumane. Treatment which continues today unimpeded by international condemnation.

It is now over ten years since Indonesia carried out a brutal invasion and occupation of East Timor. In defiance of repeated U.N. resolutions calling for its withdrawal, Indonesia continues to illegally occupy East Timor. The subsequant Timorese death toll, from the war itself and from hunger caused by crop bombardment and forced resettlement, may be as much as one-third of the original population of 650,000.

The Indonesian military has sealed off East Timor from scrutiny. Amnesty International, for example, has been permanently barred. It is often difficult to get current information on the human rights situation. Nevertheless, information obtained by church and international human rights organizations shows a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations.

INDONESIA'S GROSS AND SYSTEMATIC HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

The deaths of hundreds of thousands of Timorese during the Indonesian occupation is now common knowledge. Continued reports of mass arrests, disappearances, torture and murder; the forced resettlement and lack of freedom of movement; the appropriation of Timorese ancestral lands; the transmigration of Indonesians onto those lands; the religious persecution; the forced sterilization of Timorese women; the use of a schooling system to impose the Indonesian state philosophy Panascila; and the stated objective of Indonesia to absorb ethnic groups into the Indonesian culture, are the overwhelming evidence of a dehumanized disregard for individual human rights.

No geopolitical, economic, or ethical argument can be made to justify the continuation of Indonesian occupation of East Timor. In light of the agenda of ethnocide which Indonesia's actions illustrate, any claim or statement by Indonesia which attempts to justify remaining in East Timor is not only highly questionable, but an affront to the human dignity of all of us.

THE RIGHT TO SELF DETERMINATION

Despite over 10 years of suffering the East Timorese continue to struggle for their independence and for the survival of their culture. Throughout this period the East Timor Church has witnessed the destruction of war and listened to the aspirations of the Timorese people. Msgr. Carlos Belo, of the Catholic Church in East Timor states in a document smuggled out of the country in Spring 1985:

> 'We appeal with the greatest urgency and energy for total respect for the fundamental human rights and ethnic, cultural and religious identity of the people of East Timor.
>
> We also appeal that conditions indispensable for an open, frank and fruitful dialogue between the different parties involved in the problem should be created, in which expecially the People of East Timor, represented by the active movements, whether inside the country or abroad, should take part free from any form of coercion.'[1]

When the former head of the Church of East Timor, Msgr. da Costa Lopes, was asked in a 1984 interview what diplomatic efforts could be made by the United Nations aimed at solving the East Timor problem, he replied:

> 'There are three parties to this problem--Portugal Indonesia and the Timorese people. I think the United Nations should try to persuade Indonesia to let the U.N. send a delegation into East Timor. The U.N. should go into the mountains of Timor and talk to the people. They should discuss the situation with Xa Na Na Gusmao, the leader of the Fretilin guerrillas, who is the authentic representative of the Timorese people. I think such a move would be possible because last year during the cease-fire between Fretilin and Indonesion troops there were talks between the two sides in Timor. [2]

In a February, 1985 statement by the Catholic lay organisation, Pax Romana, East Timor was seen as,

> '...one of the most tragic and solitary exceptions in recent history to the provision in international human rights Agreements that peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'[3]

The East Timor Church said in June of 1984:

> 'In the absence of genuine self-determination and and independence, the war and misery in East Timor will go on indefinitely. We in the Church know that the resistance of the East Timorese people continues on all levels -- in their hearts and souls, in their prayers to God.' [4]

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the Canada Asia Working Group would like to make the following recommendations:

(1) to press the INdonesian government to honour its promises to allow independent observers to visit East Timor and observe conditions firsthand.

(2) to help apply pressure on Indonesian authorities to give free and unrestricted access to international relief and human rights groups to work in East Timor, particularly the International Cmmttee of the Red Cross and Amnesty International.

(3) to press the Indonesian government to agree to a resumption of the 1983 cease-fire and consider proposals for a solution to the conflict put forward by the FRETILIN.

(4) to take all measures to ensure the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and an internationally supervised referendum on self-determination to take place in East Timor.

(5) to strongly encourage the inclusion of FRETILIN representatives in all discussions or negotiations relating to the future of the Timorese people.

Footnotes

1. Untitled church document, dated 1 January 1985, signed by the Council of Priests of the Diocese of Dili and by the Apostolic Administrator, Msgr. Carlos F.X. Belo. Msgr. Belo presented it to Pope John Paul II in person on 5 July, 1985.

2. Interview with Msgr. Martinho da Costa Lopes, Newsweek, September, 3, 1984.

3. East Timor's Struggle - the Church Responds, Bulletin by the Christians in Solidarity with East Timor with a grant from the Religious fo the Sacred Heart (RCSJ) Australia, North Fitzroy, Australia 1986. Quote of Pax Romana, Geneva, 15 February 1985.

4. East Timor's Struggle - The Church Responds, op. cit., quoting Msgr. Martinho da Costa Lopes, 1984